

DR. ROBERT M. PATTERSON.

PHILADELPHIA:

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(From the Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society.)

AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY,

1st December, 1854.

Pursuant to the Society's appointment, JUDGE KANE read an obituary notice of the late President, Dr. Patterson.

DR. ROBERT MASKELL PATTERSON, was born in the City of Philadelphia on the 23d of March, 1787. His father was Doctor Robert Patterson, at that time professor of mathematics in the University of Pennsylvania, and afterwards distinguished as the director of the United States' Mint, and as President of this Society. His mother was of the Ewing family of New Jersey, a lady of admirable intelligence and great benignity of character.

Dr. Patterson was an inmate of the University almost from his cradle. He received his first lessons in its preparatory school; and passing upwards through the several col-

legiate courses, he graduated as a bachelor of arts in 1804, and as a doctor of medicine a few years later.

From the University he went to Paris, and pursued his professional studies for a while in its celebrated hospitals. But the French capital was then, as it has been since, the favoured hemisphere of the more liberal as well as the more exact sciences; Haüy, Vauquelin, Legendre, Poisson, were in the zenith. Under their guidance, and sharing their friendship, Dr. Patterson found himself attracted irresistibly to the pursuit of natural philosophy, chemistry, and the higher mathematics; and these became from that time the study and occupation of his life. After spending nearly three years in France, he crossed the channel in 1811, and completed his education as a chemist, under the instructions of Sir Humphry Davy at London. He returned to the United States in the following year.

His reputation had preceded him. In a few months after his arrival in Philadelphia, he

found himself professor of natural philosophy in the medical department of the University of Pennsylvania, and professor of the same branch with chemistry and mathematics in the faculty of arts; and to these, in the spring of 1814, was added the dignity of Vice Provost.

He retained these several positions till the year 1828, when he was persuaded to transfer his usefulness and fame to the University of Virginia,—that noble institution, the latest representative of the great mind that founded it.* No selection of a professor was ever more fruitful of benefits to a University, or growth of honour to its inmate. Mr. Madison, and the other distinguished men who were associated with him in the Board of Visitors, gave Dr. Patterson their unreserved confidence, and cherished with him the most intimate relations of personal regard.

* “Here lies buried Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of American Independence, and of the statute of Virginia for religious freedom, and father of the University of Virginia.”—*Mr. Jefferson’s own inscription for his tomb. Tucker’s Life, 2d Vol. p. 497.*

But his affections looked back upon his native city; and in 1835 he accepted the appointment of Director of the United States' Mint, which once more brought him among us. From this period, until his declining health admonished him, some three years ago, to seek relief from the toils of office, he continued to fill that eminent station,—eminent, as the appropriate, and long the appropriated reward of scientific labours.*

Dr. Patterson was elected a member of the American Philosophical Society in 1809, when he had just attained the age of twenty-two,—the youngest man ever admitted among us. In 1813, he became one of the secretaries; in 1825, a vice-president; and in 1849, he succeeded Dr. Chapman as President. He died on the 5th of September, 1854.

Dr. Patterson's character was altogether equable and simple; and on that account,

* The elder Dr. Patterson held it for nearly 20 years; David Rittenhouse had held it before him; and the corresponding office has been filled in England by Newton and Sir John Herschel.

it is a difficult one to delineate : its features were too graceful and harmonious to admit of any exaggeration.

His talents were of the highest order, and they had been cultivated with much assiduity, and under the best auspices. His affections were diffusive, but discriminating and ardent. His energies, so far as they did not regard either his own advancement or his fame, were active and fearless. Yet they were tempered perhaps by a too modest estimate of his power : For he was modest to a fault ; and his friends had reason to complain more than once, that he yielded precedence when he should have claimed it.

His mind was beautifully moulded of congenial elements. I have never known a man of more prompt or truer perceptions. And then, his ideas seemed to combine themselves without effort in the clearest and most beautiful analysis of the topic under argumentation. He never spoke, for he never thought, without disciplined though rapidly ordered method. Still, he was rarely impulsive. He

was best contented when he could gather his thoughts in council around him; for he had in a wonderful degree that excellent talent, the power of concentrating his whole mind upon a single point.

Among the men of his circle, in conversation or at the desk, his powers of language were unequalled. He was perspicuous, exact, elegant. He repeated nothing in a different phrase, for his first was the best. He would explain a theory, or describe a process, or balance an argument; and all would understand and acquiesce.

He was of course an instructor of the highest grade. His lectures were models. They traced for you the ripple-marks of by-gone theories; but he belonged himself to the era of progress, and he taught the science of the day in all its freshness. It was thorough teaching too, addressed to the mind as well as the eye. His experiments were refined and certain,—not too numerous, and without any thing of the showman's display;—one, always the most interesting and conclusive; two, per-

haps, if there had been in former years, and might still linger, some controversy about the hypothesis;—and he passed on, without renewing his argument. He had the faculty, so rare and so desirable, of feeling whether he was understood,—to speak more truly, of feeling *that he was so*.

Dr. Dunglison, who was for many years his associate in the University of Virginia, writes to me: “As a lecturer on science, Dr. Patterson was one of the most successful I have ever heard. Clear and eloquent, without being gaudy or ostentatious,—simple, as every lecturer on science ought to be,—with his various experiments always well arranged before hand, and certain to effect the elucidation he proposed,—he led his hearers on from the elementary to the abstruse with progressively increasing interest.”

He did not write a great deal, and has wronged his memory by not publishing what he wrote. Here and there, an essay or a report or a lecture or a review,—sometimes, as when we called upon him at our centenary

celebration, an avowed and formal discourse; —and for the rest, Dr. Patterson was labouring throughout his life to advance the researches or to register the success of some more ambitious votary of science. One of his pupils,* himself among the most felicitous instructors of our period, tells me that from Dr. Patterson he received his best and most effective lessons in the art of teaching. Whatever was the branch, he says, or the immediate topic, I found him thoroughly *read up*, his thoughts marshalled and lucid, his opinions formed, and his disposition frank and even anxious to make all his knowledge available to the objects I had in view.

In the different organizations, that make up for Philadelphia her proudest characteristic, Dr. Patterson was always a leading man. Our own Society, the Academy of Natural Science, the Franklin Institute, the Institution for the Blind, the Musical Fund Society, the several corporations of the church he be-

* Professor Frazer.

longed to,—in all of these, his death has left a melancholy vacancy.

In the recesses of social intercourse,—in those quiet, joyous, instructive meetings, the little groupe of FIVE, which it was my privilege to share with Bethune and Dallas Bache and Dunglison,—I cannot speak of Patterson as we knew him there, the gladsome, appreciative, cordial man, whom all of us loved. But we were not alone in this. I never heard him, says Doctor Bethune, speak one harsh word of a fellow-being: and I may venture to add, I never heard one fellow-being speak a harsh word against him. He was indeed full of charity. He had seen a good deal of the world, and moved freely in its circles of thought and action, and was not perhaps without some experience of its ingratitude;—Who can hope to be?—Yet it would have tasked him to remember an injury, and he was as sensitive to kindness as a child.

I have said nothing of his official life. It was full of large responsibilities, admirably sustained. He went into it, not without some

reluctance, for it was alien to many of his habits,—yet with pride, because it invited him to deepen the foot-prints of his father. He resigned it, after passing unscathed through the purgatory of several political conflicts, and their alternating denunciations of triumph, with the honest regrets of every ingenuous and gallant adversary.

In conclusion, let it be permitted me to say, that though I knew Dr. Patterson better than I knew any man else, and better probably than any body else can have known him, I ought not to have ventured upon the office of preparing this sketch. He was too closely my friend: I loved him too much: his death has made too painful a severance of the ties that bound me to the world of men. I have felt in every line I have traced, that I had to guard against the promptings of my heart. No one that knew him at all will think that I have praised him.

“His saltem accumulem donis, et fungar inani
Munere.”